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SUBJECT: MGLE01: LEBANESE FOCUS ON PRESIDENCY, ISRAEL,
PALESTINIANS IN DINNER WITH CODEL DODD

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Classified By: DCM Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) At a 4/19 dinner hosted by the Charge d'Affaires, Lebanese guests of various regional, political, and confessional stripes focused on the issue of the presidency in an occasionally boisterous discussion. "March 14"-affiliated guests called for the USG to use its leverage in forcing the Syrian-installed President Lahoud to resign. An MP aligned with Speaker of Parliament Berri argued back that Lahoud was insignificant, and should not become the "be all and end all." Senator Dodd urged all of the guests to help Lebanon seize the historic opportunity presented by the priority it held for U.S. policy, and to do so by getting Lebanon's political house in order. The current window of opportunity may not last forever, he warned. End summary.

¶2. (C) Charge d'Affaires hosted a dinner for Codel Dodd on the evening of April 19. Lebanese guests represented several different regional, political, and confessional perspectives. They were:

-- MP Ali Osseiran, an American-educated Shi'a aristocrat from southern Lebanon and a member (more out of political necessity than anything else) of Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's parliamentary bloc;

-- Ahmad Fatfat, a Sunni MP from the Danniyah region of northern Lebanon, member of Sa'ad al-Hariri's Future Movement parliamentary bloc, Minister of Youth and Sports, and -- in the aftermath of the February 5 sacking of Beirut's predominantly Christian Ashrafieh district by Islamic radicals -- acting Minister of the Interior;

-- MP Robert Ghanem, a Maronite from the western Biqaa Valley, a Hariri ally in Parliament (in which he chairs the influential Justice and Administration Committee), and a quiet presidential hopeful;

-- Dr. Francois Bassil, president of the Lebanese Bankers Association;

-- Mosbah al-Ahdab, a young, independent MP from Tripoli who

joined the 71-member parliamentary majority led by Hariri; a Sunni Muslim but not a member of Hariri's Future Movement;

-- Chibli Mallat, a lawyer, Middle East scholar, and outspoken political activist; a Maronite like Ghanem, he is running a highly public (if seemingly quixotic) campaign for the presidency.

PRESIDENTIAL PUZZLE

13. (C) Fatfat, Ghanem, Ahdab, and Mallat are all affiliated, in one way or another, with "March 14" -- the political alliance taking its name from the massive rally held in Beirut on March 14, 2005, one month after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Its basic ideas -- Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, restoration of Lebanese sovereignty, an international investigation of the assassination, and "reform" -- make up the platform of the parliamentary majority led by Rafiq al-Hariri's son, Sa'ad.

14. (C) Not surprisingly, the "March 14" guests were focused on the Lebanese presidency, still held by President Emile Lahoud, the Syrian-orchestrated extension of whose term in office in 2004 prefaced the elder Hariri's resignation as prime minister and his assassination several months later. Whether or not Lahoud remained in office was "the question," Mallat said. He argued that the USG could help by "staving off" the problems Lahoud's opponents faced in the course of removing him from office.

15. (C) Osseiran took issue with the "March 14" guests, arguing that Lahoud was now "insignificant," and had made himself so. There was no point in making him the "be all and end all." He accused the United States of having acquiesced in Syria's original installation of Lahoud as president in 1998, as if this cast doubt on the durability of U.S. support

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for Lebanese sovereignty in the present day.

16. (C) In any event, said Osseiran, the "March 14" forces faced a serious obstacle in trying to electing a successor to Lahoud in Parliament. Their 71-member majority was not large enough to do so on its own. It could not count on support from the parliamentary bloc of rival presidential aspirant Michel Aoun, or the Shi'a blocs of Berri and Hizballah: "Who's going to give you something for free?" Mallat good-naturedly accused Osseiran of "letting us all down" by not challenging Berri for the speakership of Parliament.

17. (C) Dr. Bassil referred to the consensus-based nature of Lebanese politics. Sometimes, however, consensus had to take a back seat to the priority of taking necessary action. The primary task before the government, he said, was simply to "make the reform and stop the corruption."

UNHELPFUL ARABS

18. (C) Ahdab and Mallat said that the "Arab world" -- that is, other Arab governments -- was playing an unhelpful role in the way it stood by Lahoud, such as at the recent Arab summit in Khartoum. Authoritarian rulers in other Arab countries had no interest in seeing one of their counterparts removed from office by a popular movement. Some of the guests urged that the USG use its leverage with Egypt and Saudi Arabia in order to force Lahoud to make way for a fairly-elected successor. Ghanem pointed out that, for all the faults of its political system, at least Lebanon, in contrast with other Arab countries, was a country where one can find "former presidents."

ISRAEL, SHEBAA, AND PALESTINIANS

¶9. (C) Osseiran called for a greater "historical perspective" in the U.S. approach to Lebanon. To make Lebanon a positive model for the region, the USG had to first "get the Israelis out" (a reference to the Shebaa Farms). "You (the USG) brought them in," he continued, his voice theatrically raised and his index finger waiving, as it had -- supposedly, at other times in the past -- the Syrians, the Palestinians, and Nasser's Egypt. In the meantime, the Lebanese would have to put up with Hizballah's insistence on low-intensity conflict with Israel; the alternative was disarming Hizballah, which would lead to civil war, Osseiran claimed.

¶10. (C) Osseiran suggested that an Israeli withdrawal from the Shebaa Farms would be a "sweetener." It would make it possible for Lebanon to make progress in reform and long-delayed post-civil war reconciliation. Mallat dismissed the Shebaa Farms issue as a "red herring," and said that Lebanon needed to "stop fighting Israel with weapons." He suggested that Lebanon even consider calling for "open borders" with Israel.

¶11. (C) Mallat said that the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was the "sorest point" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was necessary to take the issue "head on" and find ways to resettle Lebanon's Palestinian refugee population permanently, dividing it up by some formula among Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, other Arab states, and countries in the West. Fatfat said that Interior Ministry figures indicated that the Palestinian population was much higher than is widely assumed: it is actually 520,000, he said.

SEIZE THE MOMENT

¶12. (C) In his discussion with the Lebanese guests, Senator Dodd told them that "you don't want the U.S. Government to pick your president." (Heads nodded in agreement around the table.) Senator Dodd pointed to Prime Minister Siniora's ongoing state visit to Washington as an indicator of the unprecedented level of attention that Lebanon currently enjoys. The Lebanese -- the guests around the table included -- needed to seize the historic opportunity this presented.

¶13. (C) Doing so, Senator Dodd continued, required that the

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Lebanese get their political house in order, and quickly. The had to stop fighting over the past, and to stop "asking questions for which you don't know the answer" (in other words, stop pitching the Shebaa Farms issue as the key to solving all of Lebanon's problems). Rather, their goal should be to establish a functional government -- this included the issue of the presidency -- supported by the bulk of the Christian, Sunni, and Shi'a communities, Senator Dodd told them.

¶14. (U) This message has been cleared by CODEL Dodd.
FELTMAN